

Why I am a Buddhist

Tricky. I'll start with why I first went into a Buddhist centre, which is a slightly different question. Then I'll explain why I continued going. *Then* I'll try and tackle the question of *why* I'm a Buddhist. Actually, I think this talk should be titled 'How I *found out* I'm a Buddhist', which is altogether another thing.

Maybe I'll preface it all with why I didn't *think I was* a Buddhist...

When I was a child, I was innately pretty switched on. That's not to big myself up, I think a lot of kids are until they're educated to be dull and compliant (I was a teacher for 12 years, I'll come back to that), but my 'base mode' for want of a better descriptor was actually very Dharmic. I spent a lot of time with nature, walking in woods, or sitting for hours thinking about stuff like the nature of reality, the Universe, infinity. As an only child, I enjoyed playing alone and remembered recently a favourite game I used to play, where I'd make a treasure map and pack a satchel with 'tools' before going on a 'quest' to find precious jewels. Make of that what you will! I read lots and was enthralled by mysteries and unexplained phenomena. My default belief with regards to 'the afterlife' was reincarnation. It just made sense. I actually believed I had once been a bird and not to freak you out or sound completely loopy but was also adamant that my last incarnation had been on an aquatic planet orbiting a small star in the binary system of Sirius. Despite my internal musings and contentment with time alone, I did care deeply about others' happiness; at age 5, I decided to become a surgeon, so I could "help people". Inspired by a school friend, I decided to become vegetarian when I was 9; we were the bane of our teacher's life, refusing to play instruments made from tropical hardwood, needling him for wearing a leather jacket. As I moved into my teens, I joined various environmental and animal rights campaigns, believing I not only had the right but also the *responsibility* to work hard at making the world a better place.

Surely enough, over time, worldly distractions and social conditioning altered me. Disillusionment became apathy and I convinced myself that such action was impotent. What could I, one person, do? I returned from veganism to vegetarianism for a spell because it was more acceptable to those around me but even the omission of meat from my diet was more a matter of habit and preference than ethics. I scoffed at my 'childish fancies' with regards to mortality, deciding reincarnation was merely a superstition eastern metaphor, not a reality of physical existence. I reduced myself to animated electric meat, limited and finite. I didn't completely retract my earlier convictions, simply rationalised them to fit my preferred identity. I reasoned my belief in an extra-terrestrial past life was simply an attempt to distance myself from a challenging home environment, like the child who wants to believe they're adopted to explain feelings of familial alienation. Having had health problems as a teenager and sitting limited GCSEs, I moved away from my surgical ambition and studied art instead. I eventually trained to become a teacher only when the opportunity presented itself. Though this was fairly accidental, I enjoyed combining creativity with my desire to help others; sharing a love of art while helping young people develop. This was all OK, for a bit. I did normal things. I did my best to be a good person in a successful enough life and was not unhappy.

I then entered a period of intense loss. In October 2012, one of my best friends died from complications associated with alcoholism. In 2013, my partner, who'd been unemployed for our entire relationship, finally ran out of options and moved to China to teach English. My two closest friends separately made similar decisions, also moving abroad, all in the same year. I then began to question whether the circumstances I found myself in professionally were conducive to best teaching practice and started to feel that for reasons beyond my control, I was no longer equipped to do my job well enough. After teaching for over a decade, on September 1st 2015, I handed in my notice.

This gradual process of extrication from a career and identity as a teacher was itself a painful one. Loss. Stress. Illness. Anxiety. I'm not going into the details of that experience, not for modesty, but because I don't think for a moment that I'm in anyway unique. You've all suffered. You wouldn't be listening to this if you hadn't. I'm no special case, I've experienced nothing worse than any of you and by global standards, had it very easy. But I *was* suffering. I was sick of being sick and I had that same semiconscious gut instinct that we've all had; there *must* be something more. There *must* be a better way of living.

I was based in Manchester at this time and knew the Buddhist Centre as I had exhibited photographs in their café; images of Buddhist temples that I'd taken whilst travelling in Asia. I'd stumbled on these places

accidentally but felt drawn to them. It was a complete departure from my existing arts practice to recognise these photos as a series of work instead of mere holiday snaps but whilst I'd been attracted to the iconography, I knew nothing of Buddhist teachings, nor was I motivated to learn. In February 2015 a friend suggested I try meditating for relaxation. I was deeply sceptical and actually thought I was going to drop in class one lunchtime just to prove it was a silly idea that wasn't going to make the slightest difference to my troubles. "I can't sit still for that long. My head's *far* too anguished for that, but OK, just to show I can be open minded, I'll give it a go." Strangely, I don't remember my first meditation experience but I began attending regularly. I still didn't think myself a spiritual person, certainly not religious, but I wanted to learn the history of the practices. I signed up to the 'Introduction to Buddhism' course, continuing on to complete several Level 2 courses. As I studied, I increasingly had the feeling that I was being *reminded* of things, important truths I'd known deep in my bones, but buried under a belief they were strange or socially unacceptable. I started thinking to myself 'I think I'm Buddhist!' but felt unsure of the implications of that. Still, no one at the centre seemed to care what label I ascribed to myself, and seemed even less interested in ascribing any labels for me, so I enjoyed quietly becoming more involved in the Sangha.

After handing in my notice in 2015, I felt the need to run away from Manchester and relocated to Essex. I sustained a meditation practice initially, continuing to live by the 5 Precepts as much as I could because I knew it made sense to do so. Eventually though, due to 'settling stresses' and the change of conditions I became distracted. Living less skilfully, I stopped meditating. Thanks to this lapse, I realised how much my practice had benefited me and those around me, so decided to re-engage with Buddhism more formally. I found a local temple but the Chinese Esoteric tradition practiced there didn't resonate with me so I returned to Triratna and booked on a course at the London Buddhist Centre in May. This experience confirmed to me my Dharmic suspicions and I let go of my assumed secularism. In June, I came out of the Buddhist closet, in July, I became a Mitra, and in August formally requested ordination into the Triratna movement.

So, that's how I came to find not only that I'm Buddhist *now*, but aside from the formality of describing myself as such, I actually *always have been*. It's not an exclusive club you're only allowed in once you've bought some incense, spurned meat and decided to meditate daily. It's an expression of the most natural state of being; with ourselves and with each other, which emerges when everything we don't need finally begins to peel away; when the dodgy layers of old gloss paint start to flake and we notice the beautiful antique oak that for some inexplicable reason has been smothered for years by a build-up of toxic, manmade dross.

Finally, we've come to the biggie; why *am* I a Buddhist? I'm a bit flummoxed by that one, as if I've been asked to talk about why I've got brown eyes, why I'm female, or why I've been born human, in the 21st century, on an Island called the United Kingdom, on a ball of rock called Earth. I don't know *why* exactly this occurred, it's just the outcome of a long and intensely improbable but delightfully serendipitous sequence of events that resulted in this 'me', this 'here', this 'now'. I suppose I'm *called* a Buddhist because the teachings of this remarkable human who sat down two and a half thousand years ago and achieved something critically important with his mind, describe a perspective on the world that makes innate sense to me. I'm Buddhist because the system of practice developed by his disciples and presented to me by our founder, Sangharakshita not only describes how I've instinctively tried to live my whole life but neatly wraps up all the loose ends I left trailing about when I inexpertly attempted to do so without the companionship of others who share that vision. I'm Buddhist because it provides a trellis up which the crazy wild creeper of 'me' grows to find the focus and support I need to bloom in ways I never thought possible.

Until now, I've undertaken professional and leisure activities because they seemed the best option at the time, willing to try things but unwilling to commit beyond the next few months, always feeling I'd not quite found 'it' yet. Doing art at college because I *mostly* preferred it to other subjects, studying sculpture, not painting at university because I thought it would be easier to do 2D work on a 3D course than vice versa. Enjoying it... but still always wondering what would've happened if I'd studied medicine, or astronomy, or pursued my love of gymnastics, or acting. I became a teacher because that seemed more interesting than working forever in a pub but always thought I might have made a good hotelier and often wondered about my childhood dream of running an animal sanctuary. For the first time in three and a half decades I feel as if I've actually made a choice. I've finally found a way to write my own story, no longer having to squeeze into someone else's box. This choice doesn't preclude any of my skills or passions, it actively encourages me to holistically realise all I

am, become *everything* I could be. I feel Buddhism has always been my ultimate 'vocation', a context in which I can live with integrity and respect to my highest ideals alongside others striving for the same. I feel like a plant, confined for years to a pot, suddenly immersed in a deep bed of rich loam. So, I'm Buddhist because I can no longer imagine my future without Buddhism, without Triratna.

I feel that when I walked into the Manchester Centre, someone handed me a map that I spent 18 months trying to make sense of. When I reengaged with Triratna in London, someone gently turned the map the right way up. Everything fell into place and I suddenly saw my place clearly in relation to the world. Now, I am *not* saying Buddhism is a magic wand that's solved all my troubles. Oh no. My hang-ups still exist; it turns out my demons are all Buddhists too. I am still fighting them. The Buddha may teach me to accept myself as a work in progress and cultivate compassion for that self but this also means I'm challenged to acknowledge where I'm lacking and work to become more skilful. But, while my struggles still exist, I no longer see them as injurious or negative but necessary to provide the energy and momentum I need to cultivate happiness and interact more compassionately with others. I was *going* to say Buddhism gives me the weapons I need to fight my demons, but really, it's given me space to sit and have a cup of tea with them whilst taking an interest in their points of view. Maybe there's a bit more baggage than I used to carry in it but it seems my satchel is packed with exactly the tools I need and I've finally got the map to locate those precious jewels; all three of them.

And maybe I'm still not sure what I, one person, a drop in the ocean can do, but the ripples made by this drop have an effect on the world and people around me and the thing about ripples is that they turn into waves and the energy of waves can be harnessed to achieve big things. So, perhaps most importantly, after 20 minutes of babble, I'm a Buddhist because though I might be just a drop in the ocean, with the energy of the Dharma I have everything I need to make the biggest damn waves I can.

I'd just like to finish with some lyrics, read as a poem. I always liked this song but I've only recently understood it. It's by Peter Gabriel and he says "It's about being prepared to lose what you have for what you might get... It's about letting go."

Solsbury Hill

Climbing up on Solsbury Hill
I could see the city light
Wind was blowing, time stood still
Eagle flew out of the night.

He was something to observe,
Came in close, I heard a voice.
Standing, stretching every nerve,
Had to listen, had no choice.

I did not believe the information.
Just had to trust imagination.
My heart going boom, boom, boom!
"Son," he said "Grab your things,
I've come to take you home."

To keep in silence, I resigned.
My friends would think I was a nut,
Turning water into wine.
Open doors would soon be shut.

So, I went from day to day
Though my life was in a rut,
Till I thought of what I'd say,
Which connection I should cut.

I was feeling part of the scenery.
I walked right out of the machinery,
My heart going boom, boom, boom!
"Hey" he said "Grab your things
I've come to take you home."

When illusion spins her net
I'm never where I want to be
And liberty, she pirouettes
When I think that I am free.

Watched by empty silhouettes
Who close their eyes but still can see
No one taught them etiquette;
I was shown another me.

Today, I don't need a replacement.
I'll tell them what the smile on my face meant.
My heart going boom, boom, boom.
"Hey" I said "You can keep my things,
they've come to take me home."